

Friends of Marple Memorial Park Meeting
Thursday 14 March 2024
Marple Library

Present: Mick Thompson, Lorraine Thompson, Joyce Reed, Diane Jackson, Helen Wiles, Philip Wiles, Malcolm Allan, Micaela Wood, Mark Whittaker.

1.0 Apologies: Bob Wilson, Terry Wood, Patrick O'Herlihy.

New volunteers Helen and Phil Wiles were welcomed to the meeting, introduced to others present and thanked for stepping forward to help strengthen the group.

2.0 Minutes of Meeting 8 February 2024: Agreed.

3.0 Matters Arising:

3.1 Outdoor Exercise Equipment

The list of outstanding items is gradually reducing and is currently:

- Resin coating of all 3 tarmac surfaces (promised by end March).
- Fitting of new buffers to Mag Bells (awaiting shock absorbers from Kompan).
- Minor snags (paint touch-up / miss-threaded bolt) by Playground Maintenance.

We will be happy to receive the invoice for our £8,619.96 contribution to the installation costs once the above items are completed by the council's contractors.

Mark will oversee this project to completion on behalf of the group.

3.2 New moveable goalposts

A new pair of goalposts with two sets of ground sockets have been ordered. This will allow the goals to be moved between two positions so the ground can recover.

Our contribution will be £984 for supply only, the council are covering install costs.

Delivery is expected in early April. Mark will meet with Richard and the contractor to agree positions before installation and oversee to completion on behalf of the group.

When the old goals are removed the damaged ground will need to be repaired with top soil. There may be enough on the bed near Hollins House to do this but if not Jon Headlam has previously agreed to provide a 1 tonne bag for this purpose.

3.3 Remedial works to French Boules Court

Estimates of £5,727 for refurbishment and £6,887 to refurbish and extend the court by 5m provided by the specialist contractor last month were considered high, so we asked the council to seek prices from ordinary landscape contractors too.

We have now received quotes from one landscape contractor for £2,111 and £3,106 respectively, so considerably less than half price. A third quotation is expected soon.

Mick expressed concern that remedial works may exacerbate existing drainage issues. He is also keen to divide the court into two playing areas if extended, whereas Mark feels this will limit single games to half the court and is not included in current quotes.

This was discussed at some length and it was concluded that we shouldn't proceed with undue haste, so the group will reconsider this after committee changes in April.

Ample funds should be available for the group to do whatever it decides is best.

Around two-thirds of the playing surface was weeded during the last task day.

Micaela mentioned that there is a very muddy area near to the canal entrance below the skatepark. Solutions can be investigated during a future task day.

3.4 Community Hub

Our comments on the updated Community Hub layout were shared with the council on 19 February and have also been published on our web site. We hope these are taken onboard by the design team before the planning application is submitted.

Key concerns are those relating to the size of the play area, which does not reflect the discussions Mark had with them in October last year. In particular, the strategy to create the largest possible Play Park area and leave gaps suitable for adding extra equipment funded by the community in the future appears to have been ignored.

We also understand that money for play equipment is lumped in with the general landscaping budget for the whole project, which leaves the situation very unclear too.

When the new comments were submitted we also explained our disappointment at the lack of engagement since March 2021, when we asked to discuss our ideas for an alternative site, and at not being treated in the way we feel we deserve throughout the whole process. A note for the record of this is attached to these minutes.

3.5 Marple Civic Society Accessible Woodland scheme

The Civic Society met with the council on 29 February. We reiterated our support for the scheme but declined to attend. Greg Pike has fed back that it went well and he has said that the society will continue to consult / liaise with the group.

3.6 Task Days

Mark and Gill led the task day on 24 February and will lead their last on 30 March.

Mick, Larry and new volunteers Phil and Helen are booked to attend council Task Leader and Power-tools training at Brabyns Park on Saturday 20 April.

Other volunteers who have received task leader training in the past include Bernard, Malcolm, Patrick, Bob, Terry and Micaela. Although not everyone will wish to lead, there should be enough for a rota to share the load of covering future task days.

An application for daily task days until end of June is approved. A new application will be needed for the following 6 months. Mark outlined the basic process of this but will go through in more detail with Diane, who has agreed to pick up most of the admin.

It is proposed to put all risk assessments, paperwork, correspondence and contact details etc. in the group's Dropbox folders where our accounts information is already shared between Mark and Diane. They have had some provisional discussions about how this can be managed going forward and a new gmail account is proposed.

It would be good to find some new volunteers with a particular interest in the allotment beds and possibly the experimental wildflower bed too.

Someone will need to lead on the Band Room Garden if we are to continue being paid to maintain this. Bernard has done a lot of this work for a long time and may wish to carry it on. If he doesn't then Mick will look at covering this in the interim.

Mark and Gill would like to continue looking after the Lock 17 Flowerbed on Oldknow Gardens and will need access to power tools for this. If they remain on the books as registered volunteers they will be covered by normal task day applications.

Both large and small stores have been tidied and left in good order.

We will need to confirm who needs keys and arrange for any extras to be cut.

3.7 Way forward / change of leadership

Mark advised that ideally he would like to hold an AGM next month and hand over to others, although he will be happy to give support for as long as people need to find their feet. He will see the outstanding projects agreed earlier to completion and take

the lead or assist as necessary on banking, financial and admin changes.

This was agreed and, subject to the normal formalities of an AGM, it was proposed that Malcolm would become Chairman for the next 12 months, Diane would continue as Treasurer and take on more of the general admin (which should reduce).

Also subject to a formal AGM, other committee members are happy to continue and support Malcolm and Diane. Patrick wasn't able to attend but has confirmed he would like to remain on the committee. Micaela would like to continue as Social Secretary and hopefully someone will be able to fulfil the role of Secretary too.

Helen and Phil offered their apologies for the AGM on 11 April but are happy to gently feel their way into becoming more involved in the running of the group.

It was agreed that the group will downsize their activities to focus mainly on park maintenance and especially the main flowerbeds, at least in the short to mid-term. It is felt that as long as the group can keep going it will then evolve naturally over time.

It is likely that the group will need to meet less often. Mark has reviewed the constitution and believes this is already covered but it would be worth others reviewing too, so any changes needed can be proposed and agreed at the AGM.

There are a lot of factors influencing decisions on banking and financial changes. These were discussed at length and the following agreed as the way forward:

3.8 Key decisions about running the group

50-50 Club small lottery

It takes a lot of administrative work to run the 50-50 Club and with the group's objectives down-sized it is difficult to justify continuing. Phil wondered if it could be used to raise money for extra play equipment linked to the Community Hub scheme.

Mark advised that this was what he had initially been intending but felt that the way forward with the Community Hub Play Park was currently unclear and our engagement with the council has not gone well enough to be certain that this could be achieved.

It was therefore agreed to close the 50-50 Club down with the March 2024 draw being the last one. Mark will take the lead on implementing this with our subscribers.

It was noted that Kevin Murray has expressed interest in taking the 50-50 Club over on behalf of Marple Carnival. As it is licensed specifically to us for the benefit of the park and subscriptions are paid into our bank account it would be an impossible challenge to switch over. However, Mark will happily pass on our experience and give advice to Kevin if the Carnival Committee decide to setup their own small lottery.

Local Giving

The local Giving Scheme gives the group a useful income (£954 in 2023) with a fairly low level of admin. Thanks to the support of Forever Manchester, it also allows UK tax-payers to donate Gift-Aid. It was therefore agreed that it was probably worth paying the annual fee of £180 due in April for at least another year.

[PMN: Mark has shared the Local Giving online dashboard access with Malcolm and Diane and confirmed via email that we will continue for a further 12 months.]

Public Liability Insurance

The group only needs PLI for its own events or to attend those organised by others, such as Marple Carnival and Make It Marple. Insurance for task days is provided by the council. The premium is due in April and was £163 last year.

It was agreed the group may hold a lower-key Treasure Hunt and attend events to recruit new volunteers and the like, so the insurance will be renewed when due.

Band Room garden maintenance payments

The Brass Bands of Marple currently pay us £15 a month to maintain their garden.

The general consensus was that the group should be able to continue this but if that changes then we would need to notify the Bands and ask them to stop payments.

Mick said that Patrick has asked about maintenance of the Senior Citizens' gardens. Mark explained that we don't do this due to previous disagreements with them. There has been dialogue recently about a possible arrangement similar to the Band Room one but it has gone nowhere and Mark wouldn't recommend taking it any further.

3.9 Banking

Barclays (currently our main account)

This account is a nightmare to manage since the local branch closed and the two-person online authorisation is fraught with difficulties. We also cannot pay cash in via the post office and have to use the Santander account and transfer it instead.

In addition, Larry has identified that Barclays is one of the most unethical banks too.

Santander (currently used for the 50-50 Club)

This account is far easier to operate and only needs one officer to authorise payments.

We will not need two accounts once the 50-50 Club is closed.

Way forward on Banking

A number of options and strategies were considered. Unfortunately fewer banks are doing treasurer type accounts and there are even less on the high street. The Nationwide, the only bank / society with a local branch, does not do them.

After careful consideration it was agreed to retain the Barclays account administered by Mark and Diane only until our ongoing projects are complete and paid. The balance of funds will then be transferred to the Santander account and Barclays closed.

In parallel the 50-50 Club will be closed down and the Santander account will become available for use as the group's sole current account.

The officers currently authorised to administer the Santander account are Mark, Mick and Micaela. We will need to develop a strategy to switch to new officers without Mark losing access to the account until after the 50-50 Club is closed down.

The 14 page form for changing officers with Santander will need to be reviewed.

4.0 Funding - Status of Funds

2023 YE accounts are now signed off by the McInnes Partnership. They were surprised to learn that they've done this for 20 years now! Mark has mentioned to them that someone else may get in touch about next year. The group will need to consider if funding merits this but it is good practice to have an independent review.

Income since last meeting:

£16.85 Easy Fundraising.

£100.00 Donation from Marple Carnival.

£50.00 Anonymous donation.

£55.54 Local Giving.

£238.00 February 50-50 Club draw.

£475.39 Total

Expenditure so far in 2024:

£400.00 SMBC (MMA contribution to Covid Memorial)

£200.00 SMBC (War Memorial Flagpole repair)

£600.00 Total

Balance in main account: £17,888.81

Committed future spends: £10,003.96

£8,619.96 Outdoor Exercise Equipment.

£984.00 Moveable goalposts.

£400.00 Ring-fenced for Skatepark (from Marple Hall School).

Unallocated working balance: £7,884.85

We also have an amount of mixed change in partly filled cash bags.

Mark mentioned that the accounts folders run to 6 x A4 lever-arch files covering the last 20+ years. It was agreed that these should be reduced to cover the last 6 years and older records could be destroyed. Mark and Diane will deal with this.

5.0 Any Other Business

5.1 Possible walk around with Peter Cooke

Peter Cooke (Head of the council's Neighbourhood Team) has suggested a meeting between him and Mark to review outstanding issues and frustrations but has also expressed a wish to have a better understanding of the group's longer term ambitions for the park so he can consider how these can best be supported by the council.

Mark suggested that other volunteers taking the group forward should also attend and Malcolm would like to be involved, as would Mick, although he is away next week.

Mark will speak with Jon Headlam to see what can be arranged.

5.2 Possible meeting with Cllr Grace Baynham

Cllr Grace Baynham (Cabinet Member for Parks, Highways & Transport Services) has also offered to meet with Mark to discuss any key park issues.

Mark is still considering this. Malcolm didn't feel he would need to attend.

5.3 Friends group web site

Mark advised that he has provided the Friends of the Park web site free of charge since the group began. He is happy to continue doing so for the foreseeable future and hopes the group can continue to provide material to keep the site up-to-date.

5.4 Earl Nanton (Council Youth Worker)

Mark developed a good relationship with Earl over the last couple of years and will try to have a catch-up with him regarding the skatepark before fully stepping down.

6.0 Next Meeting: AGM

6pm Thursday 11 April 2024 in Marple Library.

Dear Community Hub Team,

Comments on updated Community Hub Scheme

The attached file includes a response to your questions concerning access.

This is part of a wider set of comments we have on the updated scheme now that we've had the opportunity to look more closely at it.

We encourage the council to take these onboard before making the planning application.

Failure to treat Friends of the Park in the way we deserve

Friends of the Park's disappointment at the council's failure to engage with us on the Community Hub scheme after March 2021, despite our persistent efforts to get them to do so, is well documented.

Of particular disappointment is the council's failure to discuss with us the alternative location for the Community Hub building that we suggested way back in March 2021, and still believe could be a better option. We've lost count of the number of times we asked the council to discuss this with us and of course now it is far too late.

In September 2023 we sat around the table with council representatives who led us to believe that this would all change and going forward we would be treated as "Key Stakeholders" in the park.

Unfortunately this did not happen in anything like the way we expected. We have been treated in exactly the same way as all other Marple Community "stakeholders" and kept at arms-length again.

As a group that has invested 20+ years caring for the park, with more than 35,000 volunteer hours worked and almost half a million pounds of investment in projects to improve it, we believe we had earned the right to expect far better treatment than we've received throughout this whole process.

Friends of the Park made extensive comments on the scheme presented for consultation in September 2023. Throughout our comments we asked (and were expecting) the council to discuss and engage with us, to talk options through and find the best solutions for the park.

Although we are thankful that many of our comments have been incorporated into the updated scheme (and it is now far better for that) sadly the detailed engagement we hoped for just hasn't happened. As if intent on making matters worse the council unwisely agreed to meet us on 2nd February to discuss our comments in detail, only to stonewall at the meeting and refuse to discuss anything with us.

If you have read the minutes of the last Friends Group meeting I shared with you recently you will be aware that my wife and I have decided to wind down our involvement in Friends of the Park after 20+ years at the helm. The way the group has been treated over the Community Hub engagement since March 2021 is a key factor in this decision, although not the only one.

I hope there is some learning in all this for the council about how to engage properly with well established community groups and to treat committed volunteers, although I suspect nothing will change.

I will continue in my role as Chairman for the next couple of months while the group works out how it can continue. I and other committee members will remain available for discussions during that time if required.

Kind regards,

Mark Whittaker

Chairman, Friends of Marple Memorial Park.

19 February 2024.